St. Ignatius of Loyola and *The Spiritual Exercises*

Learning to Recognize the Voice of God

By Father Hank Kraychir, Th.D.
Celtic Catholic Church
Director, St. Columba's School of Theology and Seminary

> *"Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."*
> **Romans 12:2 (NABRE)**

Throughout this series, we have journeyed with some of the greatest spiritual masters in the history of the Catholic Church. **St. John of the Cross** taught us that God purifies the soul through the Dark Night. **St. Teresa of Ávila** revealed that God dwells within the soul through the Interior Castle. **St. Thérèse of Lisieux** showed us that holiness is found in ordinary acts performed with extraordinary love. Finally, **St. Francis de Sales** reminded us that every Christian, regardless of vocation, is called to become a saint.

These teachings naturally lead us to another important question.

How do we know what God wants us to do?

Every Christian has asked this question at some point in life.

Should I accept this new job?

Should I marry?

Should I enter religious life?

How do I respond to suffering?

How do I know if my thoughts come from God, from my own desires, or from the temptations of the evil one?

The Church has long recognized that spiritual discernment is one of the most important aspects of the Christian life. Few saints have taught this more clearly than **St. Ignatius of Loyola**, founder of the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits.

His masterpiece, **The Spiritual Exercises**, has guided Christians for nearly five centuries and remains one of the most influential spiritual works ever written.

A Soldier Who Found a Greater King

St. Ignatius was born in Spain in 1491 and dreamed of becoming a great soldier. He sought honor, recognition, and success on the battlefield. During the Battle of Pamplona, however, a cannonball shattered one of his legs, ending his military career.

Confined to bed for many months, Ignatius asked for books about knights and heroic adventures. None were available. Instead, he was given books about the life of Christ and the saints.

At first he read them reluctantly.

Soon they transformed his life.

He noticed something remarkable.

When he imagined returning to worldly glory, the excitement quickly faded and left him restless.

When he imagined following Christ, the joy remained long after the thoughts had ended.

This simple observation became the foundation of his teaching on spiritual discernment.

God often speaks through the movements of the human heart.

Learning to Discern

The word **discernment** simply means learning to recognize what draws us closer to God and what leads us away from Him.

Not every good idea comes from God.

Not every pleasant feeling is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, not every difficulty is a sign that we are on the wrong path.

St. Ignatius observed that the Holy Spirit often brings peace, hope, courage, humility, and a deeper desire to love and serve God.

The enemy of our souls often produces confusion, discouragement, fear, pride, resentment, or despair.

Discernment requires patience.

It requires prayer.

Most importantly, it requires honesty before God.

As Scripture reminds us,

> *"Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God."*
> **1 John 4:1 (NABRE)**

The Daily Examen

One of the most practical gifts St. Ignatius gave the Church is the **Daily Examen**.

This simple prayer takes only a few minutes each day and helps us recognize God's presence in our lives.

The Examen asks us to:

Thank God for the blessings of the day.

Ask the Holy Spirit for light.

Review the events of the day honestly.

Recognize where we responded to God's grace and where we fell short.

Ask forgiveness.

Resolve to begin again tomorrow.

This daily habit gradually teaches us to see life through God's eyes.

Instead of rushing through each day, we begin noticing the quiet ways God guides, corrects, strengthens, and encourages us.

Finding God in All Things

One of the best known teachings of St. Ignatius is that Christians should strive to **find God in all things**.

God is present not only in churches and monasteries.

He is present in the workplace.

He is present in family life.

He is present in times of celebration and in moments of suffering.

He is present in acts of service.

He is present in quiet prayer.

Every circumstance becomes an opportunity to encounter His grace.

This does not mean that everything which happens is God's direct will.

Rather, it means that God is always at work, inviting us to trust Him even in life's most difficult moments.

As Saint Paul reminds us:

> *"We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."*
> **Romans 8:28 (NABRE)**

Freedom to Follow Christ

One of St. Ignatius' greatest insights is that we must become spiritually free.

Many people are controlled by fear.

Others are controlled by pride.

Some are controlled by wealth, comfort, reputation, or the opinions of others.

These attachments make it difficult to hear God's voice clearly.

True freedom comes when we desire God's will above everything else.

That does not mean life becomes easier.

It means our hearts become more peaceful because they are centered on Christ rather than on temporary circumstances.

When we surrender our plans to God, we discover that His plans are always greater than our own.

Discerning in a Noisy World

Perhaps St. Ignatius' teaching is more important today than ever before.

We live in an age of constant noise.

Television.

Social media.

News.

Advertising.

Endless opinions.

Every voice demands our attention.

Yet God's voice is often quiet.

Like the prophet Elijah, we frequently expect God to speak through dramatic signs.

Instead, Scripture tells us that Elijah encountered the Lord in **"a light silent sound."**

1 Kings 19:12 (NABRE)

If we never make time for silence, we may never hear the voice that matters most.

Prayer is not simply speaking to God.

It is also learning to listen.

The Celtic Catholic Priest's Reflection

One of the greatest spiritual struggles I encounter as a Celtic Catholic Priest is helping people distinguish between God's voice and the many voices competing for their attention.

Some are overwhelmed by anxiety.

Others are burdened by difficult decisions.

Many simply wonder if God is truly guiding their lives.

St. Ignatius reminds us that God has not abandoned His children.

He continues to speak through Sacred Scripture, prayer, the Sacraments, the wisdom of the Church, and the quiet movements of the Holy Spirit within a faithful heart.

The challenge is not that God has become silent.

The challenge is that our lives have become noisy.

Spend time each day in silence before the Lord.

Read the Scriptures prayerfully.

Examine your conscience honestly.

Seek wise spiritual counsel.

Above all, ask the Holy Spirit to guide every decision you make.

When we sincerely desire God's will more than our own, we discover that He has been leading us all along.

His voice does not produce fear or confusion.

It calls us to truth.

It calls us to holiness.

It calls us to Christ.

> *"Act as if everything depended on you; trust as if everything depended on God."*
> **— St. Ignatius of Loyola**

Unless otherwise noted, all Sacred Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the English language translation approved for liturgical use by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.